

HOW TO ENJOY Christmas

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DIVINE WORD PUBLICATIONS



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HOW TO ENJOY CHRISTMAS

by

Sr. M. Theresita, S.S.J.



NIHIL OBSTAT
John Kemper, S.V.D.

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+ Albert G. Meyer, Archbishop of Chicago

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The Purpose of Advent

How do you feel the day after Christmas? Two days after? A week after? Is there an emptiness because you had not been really prepared for the great event? Too absorbed in non-essentials?

But there were four weeks of Advent before Christmas! In days gone by, this period was taken seriously. In many homes no music was allowed—not even phonograph records. The family rosary was recited every evening, and family members assisted at Mass more frequently. Teenagers gave up candy and pop and ice cream—even on Sundays—like in Lent. And all mother had to say, was, “Stop fighting! Don’t you know it’s Advent!” to restore peace among the youngsters.

What has happened to Advent? The Church set it aside as a period of four weeks to be used for prayerful penance and meditation in preparation for Christmas; a time for straightening out what is crooked in our spiritual lives, for “the ax is about to be laid to the root of the tree.” Yet, year after year, many of those who have resolved “to put first things first at last,” find that another year slips by—and another—with the same misplaced concentration.

Commonly the trouble lies in belated planning. Why not start early this year—before the commercial din goes into action—planning to “put Christ back into Christmas” at the center of the activities in your home?

Christmas, with its preparatory period of Advent, has its fruits; these can be gathered during no other period, for the Liturgy of the Church, proceeding from season to season and from feast to feast through its cycles, presents to us in a series of successive moments the fruits of Christ's Eternal Acts performed in time for our 'redemption. These can be gathered or neglected or rejected in the same manner as the fruits and harvests of the earth during their seasons in the natural year. It cannot be doubted that Christ deposited for each year in the Garden of His Church a complete treasure of His merits sufficient for that year for every requirement and for the expiation of every sin. The Church Militant (through Its members—us and our families) is to gather these graces annually or be guilty of neglect.

Misuse of Advent

Yet it is a well-known tragedy that many Americans today—even American Catholic parents—spend little time during Advent on personally thinking or leading their children to think of any fruits other than those they will enjoy on their tables during the Christmas Feast.

An attempt was made in January, 1957 (while Advent and Christmas were still freshly in mind), to get a small sample of what the seasons of Advent and Christmas mean in some Catholic homes. A group of 132 Catholic upper classmen in a relatively large urban

coeducational high school were asked four questions. Their answers give a clue as to what goes on in the minds and homes of some Catholics during Advent and Christmas—what values are important.

Results of the Survey

Question 1: What is there about Christmas that makes you look forward to it?

About 7 of 9 admitted they think with most anticipation of such things as clothes (on themselves and on others), gifts, parties; decorations in church, on the city streets, and at home; the Christmas tree, the good meal, sleeping late, no homework, vacation from school, staying up all night, snow, and even "meeting Santa"—from a junior!

Social reasons took second place. Ninety-one (about 7 of 10) stated that they find the joy of Christmas in excitement, family reunions company, cordiality among the people, general atmosphere of cheer and good will, sitting around the tree and singing carols.

Religious reasons trailed behind at the rate of 1 of 2. These included Midnight Mass, "because it is Christ's Birthday" (by two students), and visiting the crib in church.

Question 2: What do you dislike most in connection with Christmas?

For 14 of the 132 Christmas is a perfect day, for their answer was one word: "Noth-

ing." Ninety-six gave commercial reasons: the commercial spirit (yet they seem to approve this spirit by looking forward to presents more than to anything else), shopping, deciding on gifts, running short of money, crowds and noise, working over-time.

Twenty-five listed these inconveniences as their most unpleasant associations with the Great Feast (evidently unaware of how sanctifying they can be if accepted in the spirit of preparation for the Christ Child Who suffered so many inconveniences—the spirit of Advent): house cleaning, dish washing, suspense over gifts, weather, snow, no snow, shoveling snow, rising early on Christmas morn, nothing to do all day, non-seasonal TV programs, exams coming up shortly after the holy days.

More telling than these figures, however, were the remarks some added: "I like everything about Christmas, but I don't like Advent." (Evidently these two are unrelated in her mind.) "I don't like to make sacrifices during the Advent season." "I like least the Advent season when you have to give up a lot of things. I don't mean I don't like it, but just the things you have to do . . . I haven't done anything spiritual." (No thought of what the Son of God gave up when He left Heaven for a stable!)

Question 3: How do you prepare for Christmas?

Two hundred and two of the activities listed were non-spiritual: shopping (in the lead),

cleaning house, getting clothes, baking, tree decorating, sending cards, saving money, wrapping gifts, preparing food.

Seventy-three activities were spiritual: daily rosary, extra prayers, Mass and Holy Communion and Confession more frequently, charity in word, correcting a fault, less TV, being more helpful.

Twenty admitted that they had made no spiritual preparation at all.

Other answers indicated that Holy Communion at Midnight Mass or on Christmas Day was mistaken for "preparation for Christmas."

Those who included Advent in their idea of preparation gave such general answers that one wonders whether they actually did anything specific and definite: "In getting ready for Christmas I do penance, prepare gifts, etc." "In getting ready for Christmas I first think of presents, then decorations, then Advent." "During the whole time I try to remain in the true spirit of the Advent Season."

One senior elaborated: "To tell you the truth, I really don't do much except for the day after my birthday which is November 11. I go to buy my Christmas gifts and I wrap them up so when it comes closer to Christmas I can help my mother. Spiritually, I try to do a little more penance, but I really don't do that much except to try to keep silence between classes which isn't much at all for Christ."

Question 4: If you made any spiritual preparation, who gave you the idea?

The 45 answers given to this question were divided as follows: teaching Sisters (either grade or high school)—30; mother—3; example of a classmate—2; a lady at work—1; my sister—1; I was brought up that way—2; do not know—6.

It does not require a close study of the survey's findings to convince one of the small part the home plays in the Advent preparation and in the celebration of the joyful Feast of Christmas in the spirit of the Liturgy of the Church. Only 6 of the total 132 students questioned had been influenced by their homes to make a spiritual preparation for Christmas the year of the survey. Perhaps those students are representative of many in America; perhaps you even know some whose attitudes strongly remind you of the answers quoted above.

The intense preoccupation with shopping for gifts and clothes, viewing displays, visiting Santa with the younger children, preparing food and cleaning house, and concentrating on seasonal decorations—these, if they do not totally exclude family concern about the spiritual preparation for Christmas (the real purpose of Advent), at least crowd it into wrong perspective by giving it a minor or even last place in the holiday preparations.

The Advent That Leads to a Joyful Christmas

The important question, then, is how can I prepare myself for Christmas so that its joy will linger on to remind me that *this time I did* take the right road to Bethlehem?

Present-day Catholics face the unprecedented competition of the commercial world with its mass appeal campaign. It begins to celebrate Christmas before Thanksgiving Day, displaying the symbols on the streets and presenting Christmas music and programs on the radio and TV for more than a month in advance. Yet the day after Christmas, when the seasonal celebration should really begin, one dials in vain for a program befitting the time. One wonders whether it is possible for the spirit of prayerful penance and meditation—the true spirit of Advent—to survive amid the clamor. Christmas Day can't even be the climax of a celebration that has lasted that long. In the words of an adolescent boy, "By the time Christmas comes, I'm sick and tired of it."

Yet it is possible, and, as a matter of fact, an obligation on the part of parents to prepare themselves and their offspring to participate fruitfully in the special graces reserved for each one during this holy season. The most practical thing they can do under the circumstances is protect their families from these harmful influences, being themselves first convinced of the true meaning and purpose of Advent as set aside by the Church. It is not too

hard, then, to make children understand that Christmas musicals and programs, parties, and visiting the displays in department stores should be left until very shortly before Christmas Eve, by reminding them that there are no Easter parades on Holy Thursday and no Easter parties on Good Friday. The PREPARATION must precede the Feast.

This preparation must be both, social and personal—Involving you and your family. You will need to plan and offer yourself *directly* to God and *indirectly* through the services and guidance you offer your family.

1. *Social Preparation*

It will be easier for yourself and the children to avoid preliminary celebration if the home offers a positive program to foster the Advent spirit. The Liturgy supplies a framework for this. First is the Advent Wreath, with its additional candle lighted each week, the whole family participating in the prayers and the ceremony; the celebration of the Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6, with its little gifts and festive meal, full of spiritual significance; the plum pudding for the first Sunday of Advent, stirred to the rhythm of that day's Collect and accompanied by an explanation of its spiritual significance; the empty manger in the home awaiting the Christ Child until after the Christmas Midnight Mass; Advent prayers of longing recited by father and repeated by the children with mother; Advent

hymns, sung together; "St. Lucy's Cats," the yellow buns baked for her feast on December 13; the reading of the Gospels for the December Ember Days; the selection of greeting cards with the true meaning of Christmas; the making of liturgical tree decorations; the placing of lights in the windows; finally, the blessing of the tree on Christmas Eve and of the crib with its Infant on Christmas morn.

These beautiful customs, full of significance, are explained in detail in two little booklets published by the Liturgical Press, St. John's Abby, Collegeville, Minnesota. "Religious Customs in the Family" by Rev. Francis X. Weiser, S.J., can be obtained for fifteen cents; "Family Advent Customs" by Helen McLaughlin, for twenty cents. The second one contains not only all the liturgical prayers for the occasions suggested above, but also recipes for the plum pudding, "St. Lucy's Cats," and foods for Christmas Eve. It likewise includes Advent hymns with notes (musical) and Advent prayers of longing. A sequel to this, "Christmas to Candlemas in a Catholic Home," by the same author at the same price, gives suggestions for the period after Christmas.

2. Personal Preparation

Besides the social ways of preparing for Christmas mentioned above, personal preparation is also necessary, and is closely linked to and aided by a Christian group preparation. Advent is a good time to undertake the correc-

tion of poorly said prayers or the initiation of prayers hitherto neglected, such as grace before and-or after meals, morning and-or night prayers, and the family rosary.

If children are to be shielded from a premature celebration of Christmas, evenings will have to be spent at home and with less TV and-or radio entertainment. This will provide time for a group discussion of the liturgy of the Mass for the following day whether all members assist at Mass daily or not. Children attending parochial schools do in most cases; teenagers in high school could find it possible to do so several times a week; and if children are not too small, mother and dad might manage as circumstances permit.

In connection with the Mass Liturgy, a resolution based on the Gospel story for each day could be easily formulated for the family to practice during the next day. Members of a good Catholic family will find it helpful to discuss their difficulties in keeping this resolution at the next "Liturgical meeting" and get suggestions for avoiding or overcoming the same or similar hardships in the future.

A child who is trying very hard to keep the resolution can be encouraged by some small reward either immediately or at the end of the Advent season, or at the end of each week before the lighting of the candle on the Advent Wreath. It may be practical to appeal to the child's natural attraction for symbolism to keep him interested. Every act of self-denial or ef-

fort at self-improvement can be compared to a part of the stable or crib which the child "builds" for the coming of the Infant God.

Christmas and the Doctrine of the Mystical Body

Another excellent preparation for Christmas is the teaching of the doctrine of the Mystical Body in very simple terms to the children, for when the tree is lighted up on the Feast, the lights can be meaningfully compared to the living members. Children find it very satisfying to pick out the light representing themselves and every member of the family. The importance of connection with the cord which is plugged in, in order to furnish the current without which there is no light, can be pointed out as symbolic of the absolute necessity of union with Christ, the Source of all supernatural life, into Whom we were incorporated at Baptism, very much like the little bulbs screwed into the sockets—dark one moment, but the next aglow—as soon as the contact is established.

If a light burns out, the meaning of a dead member is realistically portrayed; if it can be recharged instead of being replaced, it symbolizes the return of a soul to living membership through the Sacrament of Penance; if it must be removed, the consequences of death in mortal sin or excommunication are vividly presented.

There is another reason why Christmas, rather than any other feast or season of the

year, is the appropriate time for teaching this sublime doctrine to children and reviewing it ourselves: it is Christ's Birthday but we give gifts to each other. Why? At first glance, it appears foolish, but the Mystical Body holds the answer which makes the practice most reasonable, although most people probably do not think of it when giving or receiving gifts. Each person is Christ on earth, either a real or a potential member, and we give to the Head when we give to His members. We really prepare and present our gifts to Jesus in disguise. We should receive our gifts in the same spirit of faith: the gift is for "Jesus in me." What a discovery for a child! And not a fairy story or a creation of the imagination—like Santa Claus—but dogmatic truth! How it will enrich the gift-giving custom in merits and growth in God's love! It also holds the power to sanctify and lighten the burden of "shopping" amid the crowds—like in crowded Bethlehem—otherwise so unpleasant to many.

Father John Murphy has written a book on the Mystical Body in simple language, especially for the laity, entitled *The Living Christ*, published by Bruce in Milwaukee at \$2.50. Parents might find this helpful.

Silence—Then the Gloria

If the home atmosphere is lovingly quiet and gentle during Advent, it becomes easier for all members to think of the little Child Who is to be born, and also keeps their nerves steadier for the work which mounts as the

holidays approach. Parents can control this by controlling their voices. The Speech Research Unit of Kenyon College proved through tests that an answer will be given in the same degree of loudness as the question has been asked or the conversation initiated. The tests were made over the telephone and "No matter how hard they tried, the tones of people on the receiving end became louder or softer in exact proportion to the loudness or softness of the speaker."

The parent will have to be especially alert when addressed by a child in an unnecessarily loud tone of voice. Quietness breeds gentleness, and gentleness, charity. Thus help will be forthcoming when it is most needed with the approaching holidays.

There can be no more fitting climax for Christmas Day than participation in three Masses by the older members of the family, for these are really three acts in the unfolding drama of Christ's Birth, each with its own Mass Proper, advancing from the joyous song of the Angels at Midnight to the humble worship of the shepherds at dawn to the majestic adoration of the Magi in the brightness of full daylight, each with its own special fruits to be gathered at *that* Mass. Could anyone conceive a better way of teaching youth the true meaning of Christmas and of awakening in adults the genuine response to it?

Three Masses mean giving a fair portion of the day in a thoroughly concentrated manner

to the One Whose birthday is all too commonly so celebrated that He is forgotten as its Cause and Central Figure. It offers a solution, too, to the teenagers (and perhaps others) who have "nothing to do" on this Glorious Day.

Picture your home after an Advent and Christmas thus spent. Picture the spiritual progress you yourself and your children will have made in such an atmosphere and with such mutual helps. The good habits formed in four weeks of sincere trying will not vanish in a flash come Christmas. They will linger on to give you the long-desired joy of living the true spirit of Christmas with the Liturgy until Septuagesima.

*I PREPARE FOR
THE COMING OF JESUS*

December 1—Stable

Practice: I will make as many Spiritual Communions as I can today.

(Three years indulgence for each one)

Prayer: Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof; but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

(500 days indulgence, if recited 3 times)

December 2—Floor

Practice: I will make acts of humility (like being silent under suspicion or judgment).

Prayer: Jesus meek and humble of Heart, make my heart like unto Thine.

(500 days each time)

December 3—Windows

Practice: I will answer all questions patiently today.

Prayer: O God, Thou art all powerful; make me a saint. (500 days)

December 4—Walls

Practice: I will be charitable in my thoughts about others today.

Prayer: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. (500 days)

December 5—Roof

Practice: I will close my eyes during prayer today, to avoid distractions.

Prayer: Blessed be Jesus and His most pure Mother. (300 days)

December 6—Filling the Cracks in the Walls

Practice: I will mortify my eyes at every opportunity.

Prayer: O Mary, Virgin Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me. (300 days)

December 7—Cleaning out the Cobwebs

Practice: I will keep the place where I work, tidy and clean all day.

Prayer: O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. (500 days)

December 8—Straw for Mary to kneel on at the side of the Crib (Feast of the Immaculate Conception)

Practice: I will apologize if I happen to do anything wrong or make a mistake.

Prayer: Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies. (500 days)

or

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. (500 days)

December 9—Straw for St. Joseph to kneel on

Practice: I will forgive those who hurt me today, without a grudge or ill feeling.

Prayer: O St. Joseph, foster-father of Our Lord Jesus Christ and true spouse of Mary, the Virgin, pray for us. (300 days once a day)

December 10—Staff for St. Joseph

Practice: I will help anyone who needs it today, whenever possible.

Prayer: My God and my All. (300 days)

December 11—Manger

Practice: I will speak in a soft voice.

Prayer: Lord, increase our faith. (500 days)

December 12—Warm Mantle for Mary (Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe)

Practice: I will be very kind to my mother today (and to Sister in school if I go to school).

Prayer: O Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, make us saints. (300 days)

December 13—Straw for the Manger

Practice: I will not complain about anything today, not even the weather.

Prayer: My God, I love Thee. (300 days)

December 14—Under-clothes for Jesus

Practice: I will be attentive at my work today.

Prayer: Teach me, O Lord, to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. (500 days)

December 15—Warm Wrap for Jesus

Practice: I will be silent whenever it is not necessary for me to talk today.

Prayer: Sweetest Jesus, be not my Judge, but my Savior. (300 days)

December 16—Head-covering for Jesus

Practice: I will sit and stand straight today.

Prayer: O Jesus, with all my heart I cling to Thee. (300 days)

December 17—Blanket for Jesus

Practice: I won't waste a minute of time today.

Prayer: Christ Jesus, my Helper and my Redeemer. (300 days)

December 18—Little Pillow for Jesus (Feast of the Expectation of Our Lady)

Practice: I will smile at those I don't like today.

Prayer: Jesus! Mary! Joseph! (7 years 280 days)

December 19—Ox

Practice: I will obey at once and cheerfully.

Prayer: Sweet Heart of Jesus, be my love. (300 days)

December 20—Donkey

Practice: I will thank God often in my mind today, for everybody and everything.

Prayer: O Jesus, be to me Jesus, and save me. (300 days)

December 21—Lantern in the Stable

Practice: I will make visits to Jesus and Mary often today, either in church or spiritually.

Prayer: O Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, have mercy on us. (300 days)

December 22—Food for the Holy Family

Practice: I will eat without any complaining about the food today.

Prayer: My Mother, my Hope. (300 days)

December 23—Opening the Stable Door for the Shepherds to enter

Practice: I will not watch television today at all.

Prayer: O Heart most pure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, obtain for me from Jesus a pure and humble heart. (300 days)

December 24—Gifts for Jesus (like the Shepherds' Lambs)

Practice: I will be agreeable by giving in to what others want and giving up my own will.

Prayer: Sweet Heart of Jesus, I give myself to Thee through Mary. (300 days)

December 25—A Committee of Welcome

Practice: I will forget myself and do all I can to make everybody else happy by serving them and being nice to them.

Prayer: Come, O Lord, and tarry not. (500 days)



SISTER MARY THERESITA, S.S.J.

Sister Mary Theresita, S.S.J., one of seven children, entered the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph after the 8th grade. Two younger sisters followed her into the same religious community. She has taught children in grades 4 to 8, and religion and social studies in high School. Sister especially enjoys making surveys based on the views of teenagers she comes in contact with, hoping to bring about a better understanding between our present day youngsters and the world in which they live.

She is a strong advocate of justice, fighting prejudice in all its phases, and has a great devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. She obtained a Bachelor's Degree in History at DePaul, and a Master's Degree in Sociology at Loyola in Chicago.

HOW TO ENJOY CHRISTMAS

We enjoy Christmas in the degree in which we enter into the spirit of the Advent preceding it. Modern commercialism has gone far in wiping out this spirit. Let's not lose Advent! It has a purpose. And the logical place to begin to restore its proper "keeping" is in the home—by negative action (giving up things and cutting down amusements) and by positive improvement spiritually (concentrating on the true meaning of Advent and Christmas as portrayed in the Liturgy). Only parents can save a child today from being cycloned away in the twirl of commercial materialism.

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